

Malayala panorama

The venue is as much a draw as the exhibits at the Kochi Muziris biennale

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When the sails of the Greek ship fluttered to life with the monsoon winds, the massive wooden hull steered through a busy route across the Periyar river basin until shallow waters brought it to a halt. Young Greek sailors set out in the waiting local boats carrying gold and rolls of silk to reach the bustling port. Here they met with other traders, walked along neatly-laid market streets, ready to barter their gold for pepper, the spice king. Since bartering would take time, they set up homes in the interior living a lifestyle that poet-prince Ilango Adigal described as 'exotic' and a source of 'local wonder'.

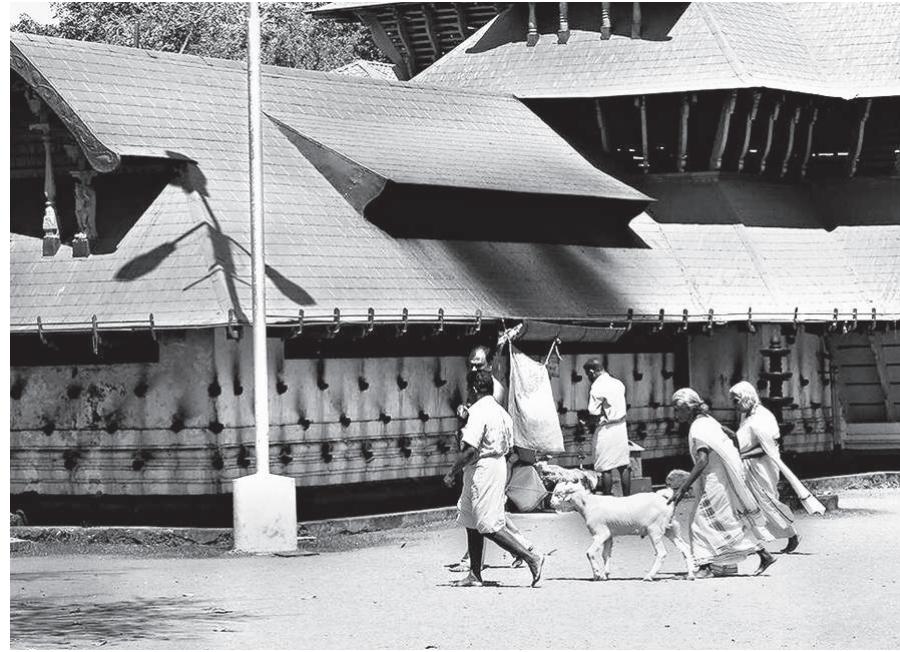
The port that Adigal described in *Silappathikaram* (The Story of the Anklet), Sangam literature's epic Tamil poem (circa 2nd century A.D.), was the Muziris, a vibrant trade destination and an important stopover along the great Spice Route. It was the destination for ships from an estimated 40 countries including China and Portugal. Tragically, in 1341, Muziris was submerged by the waters of the Periyar.

Today, the Muziris is back on the map. The art world is looking forward to the third edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016 set to open on December 12. This year, its co-founder Bose Krishnamachari along with curator Sudarshan Shetty reccecd the site of the Kottapuram excavations, one where the biennale's performances will take place. The area is part of the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP) undertaken by the Kerala government in 2006 and described as the 'most remarkable historical reclamation project' by *The New York Times*.

Just an hour by ferry from Fort Kochi, this venue is one of the major attractions of the biennale. Krishnamachari, who was born in Ernakulam district, declares that the Muziris is like a mother to him. "I was born in this region and can only wonder about its cosmopolitanism back then," he says. He marvels at the fact that in the Muziris region 3,000 years of history unfolds with just three metres of digging. Even now, there are more than 33 communities living in the Fort Kochi and Mattancherry area and at least 16 different languages spoken here.

These neighbourhoods are close to the Muziris pattanam, which some historians consider to be the Muziris port. The pattanam (town) has been the site of archaeological excavations by the Kerala Council for Historical Research since 2007 and has yielded Roman gold coins, beads, ornaments and pottery. Roberta Tomber, an expert from the British Museum, said that no other site in India has yielded so much archaeological evidence. But evidence aside, the pattanam is where Christians believe that Thomas the Apostle landed in 52 A.D. at Maliankara. Christianity is thought to have spread to the rest of India through the churches he founded in Kerala.

The pattanam spreads over 70 hectares and most historians believe it to be part of a larger Muziris Heritage Site. This encompasses areas in Ernakulam and Thrissur districts. Benny Kuriakose, the conservation consultant of MHP says, "There is controversy about the precise location of the



Abul Kalam Azad's photographs are an attempt at locating Ilango Adigal's Muziris in the contemporary world.

Muziris," Kuriakose says. "Although I do not want to be part of this controversy, I believe that it is a much larger area encompassing monuments and sites that are an integral part of the history of Kerala."

Contemporary photographer Abul Kalam Azad, founder of the Ekalokam Trust of Photography, grew up in Mattancherry. He believes that the precise location of ports was not mentioned in any of the Sangam period literature because the port activity was not concentrated but spread out all over the region. According to him, during every monsoon the location changed, owing to the changes in wind direction, speed and river desiltation.

The monuments that the MHP has secured so far are significant. Not many know that India's first mosque is in this region. The Cheraman Juma Masjid was built in 629 A.D. Then there is the Paravur Jewish Synagogue, one of India's earliest synagogues in the former Jewish Street of the Paravur region about 26 kilometres from Ernakulam. The Paliam Dutch Palace has also been restored carefully and features elaborate wooden staircases and thick walls with splayed openings. Eventually MHP plans to secure several historic monuments, including the 16th century Kottapuram Fort, Kizhthali Shiva Temple (built around 343 C.E.) and the 1,800-year-old Kodungallur Bhagavati Temple.

"Think about it," Krishnamachari says. "Three religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – entered the country through the Muziris port and coexisted peacefully. The Muziris was globalised through trade and rooted in different cultures."

Although separated by centuries, Azad likens himself to the poet Adigal. While writing *Silappathikaram*, Adigal had lived in Trikkana Mathilakam, the present-day fishing village Mathilakam in Thrissur district which is approximately 20 kilometres from the pattanam. Mattancherry (where Azad

was born) is about 40 kilometres from the pattanam. "As a photographer, my interest is in the way Ilango describes my own ancient land and people," he notes. Having photographed the region as a 14-year-old boy in 1974, Azad moved back to his hometown recently to re-examine Adigal's ancient text in a contemporary context. He imagines that Adigal would have drawn his inspiration from the land and people surrounding him. So, through his ongoing 'Black Mother I & II' series, shot in the same region Adigal would have roamed, he wants to create a parallel text that presents contemporary culture, landscape and people of the land.

Azad is sure that there were more ports than the Muziris. He has pored over ancient cartography, literature and other historical documents that refer to six major South Indian ports of Sangam period: Tondi (Tyndis), Muziris (Muchiri), Korkai, Kaveripattinam, Perimula (or Perimuda) near Rameshwaram and Mahabalipuram. As he puts it, "In recent years, Muziris has received excessive media coverage and academic attention. All the Sangam period ports were equally important and contributed much to the economic, social and cultural formation of the South."

Right now, Kuriakose says that the Kerala government wants to go ahead with the second phase of the MHP. Establishing a maritime museum and conserving more monuments will be part of this plan. Once completed, Muziris will transform itself into an exquisite heritage trail. The first two editions of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale saw over a million footfalls of which many visited the Muziris. Over the next 50 days, visitors to the biennale will return home with stories of a lost port of India. But Kuriakose notes, "What we have found is only the tip of the iceberg."

Jayanthi Madhukar is a freelance writer who believes that everything has a story waiting to be told.